A STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE NOVELS OF PAUL BOURGET WITH REFERENCE TO THOSE OF BALZAC'S *COMEDIE HUMAINE*

BY

JOHN HANNIBAL CARTER

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN FRENCH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1944

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A STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE NOVELS OF PAUL BOURGET WITH REFERENCE TO THOSE OF BALZAC'S *COMEDIE HUMAINE*

This thesis is an analysis of the relationship of the thinking of Bourget and Balzac upon the social problems of their day as revealed in their chief literary form, the novel. This problem has not previously been treated at any length, although various scholars have indicated that a study of these two novelists would be timely, and many critics have further pointed to specific similarities in thought and technique in the novels of these writers. Curtius particularly recommended this investigation in 1923. Feuillerat noted the importance of such a study in his biography of Bourget in 1937. Among the critics who have especially observed many of the affinities between the two novelists there must be mentioned Marcel Bouteron, Emile Faguet, Charles-Brun, Albert Thibaudet, Tancrède de Vison, Francis Carco, Paul Mannoni, Victor Giraud, Léon Maes, Edgar M. Bowman, Alphonse V. Roche, and Wilson C. La Due. Further, Bourget himself was cognizant of and often avowed the great influence of Balzac upon his mental and literary development. This was clearly evident in his *Etudes et portraits* (1888) as well as in his *Nouvelles Pages de critique et de doctrine* (1922).

The main objective of this investigation was to treat Bourget and Balzac primarily as social analysts with definite philosophies covering many of the social problems characteristic of the modern French era, for several of the critics named above, and others, have emphasized the sociological signficance of the novels of these two authors and have declared the philosophy underlying their novels to be Traditionalism. Bourget was taken as the point of departure; his writings which may correctly be classified as novels were studied in their entirety. By far the greater portion of his critical writings of a political, sociological, philosophical, or purely literary nature were subjected to close scrutiny. Secondly, many novels of the *Comédie humaine* were selected for careful consideration, either on account of the fact that Bourget had noted them, or because it was thought that they would offer material most pertinent to the Bourget-Balzac problem. These sources of information were considered of prime importance in formulating the conclusions offered. Many critical studies of

both of these novelists and several general studies dealing with the history, government, sociology, and ideologies of the period since the Revolution were read and used freely; but they were regarded as rather of secondary importance in the final summation.

The family, religion, government, social disorganization, and social principles were accorded major attention. Characters and *milieux,* the societies portrayed by Bourget and Balzac, were examined again and again from the points of view demanded by these major topics in an effort to determine to what extent Bourget was the disciple of Balzac and to what degree he continued his predecessor's work.

Bourget and Balzac each felt that his duty as a novelist lay in the examination and exposition of the basic principles of society; the novelist would function as a doctor of the social sciences, probing the ills of the State and suggesting the remedy, monarchy and religion. Through the medium of the novel both writers denounced democracy and revolution and established the principles of an absolutist and traditionalist social philosophy. Bourget concluded that the purpose of the philosophy of the *Comédie humaine* was to point out the fallacies of the increasingly democratic and irreligious bourgeois era which was reducing France to a state of chaos. His own purpose in the novel was to continue the vast social inquiry initiated by Balzac and substantiate the latter's theses for Church and monarchy. The liberals, the republicans, and the revolutionaries had done France a great disservice. In the eyes of both writers the Revolution had instituted a distinct cleavage between the old France and the new.

Yet slow evolution, not catastrophic change, is the natural procedure of social progress and vitality. The attempt by revolutionary ideologists to reconstitute society had divided the French State and sapped its energies. The society issuing from the Revolution was decadent. The evaluation of that society by Bourget and Balzac was intended to lay bare the social sores that plagued French civilization and to indicate that in a closer accord with the older, more traditional mores lay the way to social rehabilitation. The condemnation of contemporary society and the nostalgic yearning for what Balzac and Bourget esteemed

as the social solidarity and grandeur of the past imbued the pages of both alike. They conceived the greater portion of their works under the impulsion of the guiding principle of the social responsibility of the writer, evident in frequent digressions and interpolated dissertations, choice of subjects and characters, and straightforward declarations in forewords, prefaces, and dedications. Alike they intended that their novels present a social program, the program of Traditionalism. In scope, the ambitions of both novelists exceeded their accomplishments, notwithstanding the fact that their aims and their programs were made clear. Their works do, however, constitute a sociology within the limits imposed by fiction.

Sociologically, in the novels of both writers there are lacunae, even though the bulk and scope of the *Human Comedy* loom larger than the novels of Bourget. As the complete representation of a society the novels of neither writer are adequate. Bourget excelled in the portrayal of the bourgeois world. Like those of Balzac, his affinities were for the circles of the aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie. His novels pay insufficient attention to the lower bourgeoisie, the proletariat and the peasant. He treated but slightly the means of earning a livelihood in a modern society regulated largely by finance, industry and commerce. Contrary to the example of Balzac, he treated the agrarian problem cursorily, despite the fact that France still is largely an agricultural society. Also, he ignored many urban conditions or gave them minor attention: pauperism and charity, the moral and economic status of the proletariat and lower bourgeoisie, education among the masses, industrial conditions and commerce. Public utilities, population problems, community resources, many social institutions received no consideration at his hands. His urban and rural sociologies are incomplete on account of his leisurely and restricted settings.

Bourget discounted the positive social and political advances of the Third Republic. He criticized the Education, Association, Separation, and Divorce Acts; he did not mention other humane social legislation regulating the employment of women and the welfare of children, improving industrial working conditions, stimulating collective bargaining, and providing old-age pensions. He did not credit the regime with increasing agricultural, industrial and commercial prosperity. On the other hand, he care-

fully pointed to the anarchist outrages and other weaknesses of the republican polity. There is hardly a social question of the past half century which does not find its echo in the works of Bourget; but many problems of interest to contemporary history find only an echo. Moreover, Traditionalism vitiates the objective value of his novels as a history of customs.

Balzac is similarly open to the accusation of leaving hiatuses, in spite of the greater number of volumes he feverishly produced. The periods with which the novels of the *Comédie humaine* dealt were those of the Revolution, the First Empire, the Restoration, and the July Monarchy. Unlike Bourget, Balzac treated the question of money in great detail. But he can be accused of an inadequate treatment of educational practice, an ill-rounded analysis of marriage, the incompetent handling of industry and science, the rather unsubstantiated analysis of economic trends, the scant justice done reform and revolutionary movements, and the slighting of the proletariat.

The Traditionalism of Balzac was that of the theorists of the Restoration. Reduced to its simplest elements, their doctrine taught that all power came from God, who created society with its inequalities established in the laws of nature. The individual had no rights, society alone rejoiced in privilege, and the Prince, God's representative on earth, could administer his territory like any landowner. Balzac found in the atmosphere of the Restoration the "two eternal verities," religion and monarchy, which were in turn transmitted to Bourget. Here also was formulated their concept of the supremacy of society and State over the individual. On this premise was founded their abhorrence of the error of the Revolution which taught the importance of the individual, "and so let loose his appetites." The traditionalist philosophy of Bourget, Brunetière, Barrès, Bazin, Bordeaux, and L'Action Française was derived in direct succession from that of Rivarol, de Maistre, Bonald, Ballanche, Balzac, Le Play, and Taine, the last of whom Bourget respected as a master after Balzac, and with whom he disagreed principally in the matter of excessive dependence upon science, a scission made public wih the appearance of *Le Disciple* (1889). The ideas of society as a synergy and of positivistic determinism adopted by Taine had been apparent in the foreword of the *Comédie humaine;* here Taine found the theories of the determining influence of

the social and physical *milieu,* race, and climate. In his dynamic presentation of the *Origines,* Taine condemned the Revolution and the First Empire which together founded practically all of the modern institutions of France. It was the *Origines* which, Bourget declared, marked the great modern return to the traditional truths of Balzac. Extreme admiration for Balzac was common to both Bourget and Taine. The great influence of Taine upon Bourget was only a reinforcement of the original influence of Balzac.

The influence of Balzac upon the mental and literary formation of Bourget was predominant, and became evident in a multiplicity of instances and similarities. The discovery of Balzac decided him in his life's work (1870). Bourget would write masterpieces in the fashion of Balzac, imitate the heroes of Balzac. He would even follow the methods of work of the master. He lived with the characters of his imagination more than with his contemporaries, in the manner of Balzac. The influence of the earlier Traditionalist was revealed more emphatically with the appearance successively of *Le Disciple* (1889), *Outre Mer* (1895), *L'Etape* (1902), *Un Divorce* (1904), *L'Emigré* (1907), and *Le Démon de midi* (1914). Before *Le Disciple* the novels of Bourget showed the varied influences of Baudelaire, the Goncourt brothers, Leconte de Lisle, Renan, Taine, Stendhal, Balzac, and others. *Le Disciple* definitely stated the social responsibility of the author and "set once for all the standards and methods of the problem novels he would write twenty years later." Like Balzac and Taine, Bourget considered the novel as a means of contributing to the natural history of man, "une grande enquête sur l'homme." Again, like Balzac and Taine he accorded an important place to *décor.* Characteristic of Bourget in his earliest technique, the analysis of *états d'âme* had been preceded by the same technique evident in the *Human Comedy.*

Bourget's first full-length novel, *Cruelle Enigme* (1885), evolved in the manner of Balzac by producing fully the *milieu* in which the principal character had developed. In *Un Crime d'amour* (1886) the moralist was undeniably revealed. *Mensonges* (1887) marked the first successful effort of Bourget to represent the complete society envisioned by Balzac as the domain of the novel. Bourget's *Physiologie de l'amour moderne* (1888) brought Bourget closer to ultimate faith in religion for the answers that

science could not give. Similarly, Balzac had evolved from science toward religion. *Un Coeur de femme* (1890) brought into action the second of the two eternal verities; to the social force of religion Bourget now added the monarchy, and these two social forces were developed more elaborately in *L'Emigré* (1907), *Le Démon de midi* (1914), *Un Drame dans le monde* (1921), and elsewhere. As early as *La Terre promise* (1892) Bourget became keenly conscious of the need to double the analysis of interior life with the study of the exterior and social qualities of character. In this novel also, for the first time, Bourget began to foresee the social consequences of the problem treated. *Cosmopolis* (1893) was another step in the same direction. In this novel the examination of Dorsenne represented the extirpation of dilettantism, as the death of Claude Larcher (*Physiologie de l'amour moderne,* 1888) represented the disappearance of the more sensual man. With the publication of *Outre Mer* (1895) Bourget appeared the full-fledged reforming sociologist. In its combination of the *roman d'analyse* and the *roman de moeurs,* in its complexity, *Idylle tragique* (1896) appeared as the most Balzacian of Bourget's novels to that date. In the course of time, therefore, Bourget attained the social truth which he had long sought, the truth of Balzac. Henceforth Bourget's novels became more purely traditionalistic, and he set the family in its position of preëminence as the social cell.

The evidence gathered from the comparative analysis of the novels of Balzac and Bourget proves decisively that both novelists were Traditionalists who propounded the same social themes and held the same sociological views. These ideas were not original with Bourget. They were borrowed directly and indirectly from the *Comédie humaine.* Consciously Bourget exploited and adapted the vast resources of the *Human Comedy.* The pessimistic sociology of both writers can be defined as Traditionalism and their main theses for social organization are:

1. Society proceeds from God and existed before the individual.

2. Man is a product of nature. He needs the restraining forces of religion and monarchy to curb his anti-social individualism and appetites, and guide him into channels of social good.

3. Society represents a field of combat, and functions most

effectively when viewed as a synergy that maintains the harmony of its component parts.

4. The basic and indestructible unit of that society is the family, not the individual.

5. Marriage is the means of preserving and continuing that society, and must be indissoluble.

6. The child is the natural product of the family. His rights and duties as a member of the society to come must be respected and enforced.

7. Social development must be slow and evolutionary, in accord with heredity and environment. Social ascension is determined by rigid laws decreeing a long period of maturation at the same social level.

8. Conformity to existing social conditions and acceptance of one's position in society maintain social durability and continuity.

9. Catholicism explains the purpose of one's life and makes tolerable expiation, redemption, the sense of suffering and of death, the acceptance of one's social status.

10. The present does not enjoy the right to change the substance of the traditional society developed in the past.

11. The traditional political and social hierarchy is explained and justified by the teachings of Catholicism.

12. As consuming social energy, thought and ideology are destructive. The supreme regulator of social activity is religion, and it alone can conduct thought along lines resulting in commensurate social values.

13. Preexistent before the individual, society cannot be created and recreated by any revolutionary processes of man. Revolution solves no problems, it only increases the number of them.

14. A product of revolution, the *Code Napoléon* destroys both family and society. Destruction of the principle of primogeniture, the ascendancy of the principle of the equal division of wealth among offspring, and divorce sap the social unit at its roots.

15. Revolution has caused a scission in the development of France, creating dissension and disorganization. It has produced democracy, the logical outcome of which is communism, which, proclaiming the *Rights of Man,* sets every man against his neighbor, and sets all men against the State.

16. The theory of equality is an error, it does not exist in nature and can be found only in the grave.

17. Further, revolution and its ideologies have been used simply to dupe the masses, and in the social upheaval following there are created inevitably and always new aristocracies which exploit and may prove more oppressive than the old.

18. The democratic ideal is wasteful of human and social energies. In scorning the superiorities of a traditional aristocracy, it foolishly puts its faith in the mediocrity of numbers and elective suffrage.

19. Class struggles, the *arriviste,* and the *révolté* are products of the leveling process proceeding from revolution and Rousseauism; they are cause and corollary of social disorganization.

20. Traditionalism is the one possibility offering, not infinite progress, but the progress of society beyond its present state; it preserves social order, durability, and continuity.

To study and verify these social theses which buttressed their novels, Bourget and Balzac alike used first the method of analysis and then that of synthesis in order to arrive at their conclusions and give them the appearance of universal application. If Balzac at times equalled Bourget in the power of psychological and social analysis, Bourget was Balzac's inferior in the faculty of synthesis and general social breadth. The lesser genius, Bourget was caught in the rigidity of his system; Balzac, the greater genius, was too big to be confined by any system, even that which framed his social philosophy. Bourget was unable always, despite his constant effort, to give the impression of life in its turbulence, its many facets and phases; the creation of Bourget does dot always pulse with the life that infuses the *Comédie humaine.* Excelling in analysis and detail, Bourget lacked the synthetic powers of Balzac. Truly a contribution to the natural history of man, the novels of Bourget constitute a series of social documents of great perspicacity, but of lesser social range than the *Human Comedy* of Balzac.

VITA

John Hannibal Carter was born August 18, 1909, in Memphis, Tennessee. He received his elementary and secondary school training in St. Louis, Missouri, where he was graduated as valedictorian of the Class of June 1925 of the Sumner High School. He was granted the degree of Bachelor of Arts with honors in Latin by the University of Illinois in June 1929. After graduate study in the Department of Romance Languages during the summer sessions of 1930-1933, he was awarded the degree of Master of Arts by the University of Illinois in October 1933. He continued his graduate studies in French, Spanish, and Latin during the summer sessions of 1937-1941, and as a Julius Rosenwald Fellow through the summer quarter and the first semester of the academic session of 1942-43.

Since September 1929 he has served as an instructor of foreign languages in the public school system of St. Louis, Missouri; at the Vashon High School 1929-1930, at the Stowe Teachers College 1930-1933, at the Sumner High School 1933-1942. In February 1942 he was transferred to the Stowe Teachers College where he now holds the position of assistant professor in the Department of Modern Languages. He was an extramural instructor of French for Lincoln University of Missouri 1936-1940.

At the University of Illinois he was elected to membership in Phi Eta Sigma, Eta Sigma Phi, Phi Kappa Epsilon, and Pi Delta Phi. He is also a member of the American Association of University Professors, The National Federation of Modern Language Teachers, The American Association of Teachers of Spanish, the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, and the National Education Association.